

When Election Results Count: A Reflection on De-democratization in Thailand¹⁾

TAMADA Yoshifumi*

Abstract

Thai politics has become chaotic since 2006. Court verdicts and military intervention have become more instrumental in the change of national leaders than national elections. This essay argues that Thailand's current political crisis derives from democratization.

This essay approaches the crisis from a historical perspective. Elections made little difference for so long after their original introduction in 1932 since, for national leaders who assumed office by military coup, the key to acquiring and maintaining power was the armed forces and civilian bureaucracy, rather than national elections. However, democratization advanced slowly from the 1970s, and accelerated in the 1990s. In 1997, the electoral system became the focus of attention for the first time in the process of drafting a new constitution. Electoral reform was pivotal to democratization. Elections came to count and became indispensable for ordinary citizens.

Anti-democratic forces, spearheaded by the People's Alliance for Democracy (yellow shirts), did not feel happy with this expanding democratization and resorted to a coup to stall the momentum for democratization. Against these anti-democratic forces, another political group, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (red shirts) emerged. These two forces struggled respectively against and for elections.

Thai politics has become chaotic since 2006. Court verdicts and military intervention have become more instrumental in the change of national leaders than national elections. People with little experience with political activism have taken to the streets. Thai politics has veered away from both electoral democracy and conventional Thai political practice.

It would be better for us to approach the crisis from a historical perspective. Democratization advanced slowly from the 1970s. It accelerated in the 1990s with political reform and a new constitution in 1997. The Thai Rak Thai party (TRT hereafter) won the first general election under the 1997 constitution and its leader Thaksin became premier in 2001. He transformed Thai politics by overcoming the administrative instability and weak leadership of democratically elected leaders in

* 玉田芳史, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University
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Thailand [Pasuk and Baker 2009; McCargo and Ukrist 2005]. Electoral reform was pivotal to this change. Despite a coup in September 2006 and suspension of the 1997 constitution, democratization continued unimpeded. Unlike earlier coups, many citizens after 2006 have refused to acknowledge the end of democratic politics in Thailand.

This essay argues that Thailand's current political crisis derives from democratization. Thaksin was a product of democratization, and anti-democratic forces resorted to a coup to stall the momentum for democratization. With voices for democracy continuing to resist, however, political turbulence has seen no end.

In part one, I examine Thai politics before elections mattered. Why did elections make little difference for so long after their original introduction in 1932? I will focus on the make up of parliament and the number of elected MPs among cabinet ministers. In part two, I will consider how elections came to count. Although the constitution was revised many times, the electoral system became the focus of attention for the first time in the process of drafting a new constitution in 1997 [Sombat 2002]. It became a burning issue again with constitutional amendments in 2007 and 2011. Drafters came to pay more attention to elections than to parliament. I will investigate the impact of electoral reform on voting behavior and election results. Elections became indispensable for ordinary citizens. In part three, I examine the reaction against democratization and counter reaction. Anti-Thaksin forces are problematic in two senses. First, they cannot countenance that Thaksin's party has won every election since 2001. To deny the legitimacy of the elected, they have tried to deny electoral democracy. Campaigns against Thaksin are tantamount to challenges of electoral democracy. Thus they engage in a futile battle against a majority of citizens. Second, they carelessly pit monarchial legitimacy against democratic legitimacy. Their professed loyalty to the monarchy recklessly involves the monarchy in politics and exposes it to criticism. Against these anti-democratic forces spearheaded by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, or yellow shirts), another political group, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD, or red shirts) emerged and became the largest mass movement in Thai history.

1. When Elections Did Not Matter

A political system can be defined as democratic to the extent that "its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote" [Huntington 1991: 7]. Following this definition, politics in a parliamentary system becomes democratic when 1) fair and free elections are held, and 2) the prime minister is appointed from among elected MPs according

to election results. Under a democratic parliamentary cabinet system, the people elect members of parliament who elect the prime minister, who is in turn accountable to parliament. Thailand has had twenty-three national elections since 1933 (in 1933, 1937, 1938, 1946, 1948, 1952, February and September 1957, 1969, 1975, 1976, 1979, 1983, 1986, 1988, March and September 1992, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011). But it has taken a long time for the prime minister and most cabinet ministers to come from elected MPs.

Thai cabinets may be judged by whether a prime minister is an elected MP and by how many ministers are elected MPs. Prime ministers who were elected MPs took office for two years from 1946 (Khuang, Pridi, and Thawan), a half year in 1957 (Plaek), one and a half years in the mid-1970s (Khukrit and Seni), two years and six months from 1988 (Chatchai), fourteen years from September 1992 (Chuan, Banhan, Chawalit, and Thaksin), and now since February 2008 (Samak, Somchai, Aphisit, and Yinglak). Among 18 constitutions since 1932, there have been only four editions that stipulated that a prime minister be an elected MP—in 1974, 1991 (amended in 1992), 1997 and 2007. Before 1992, prime ministers tended to be determined before elections, except for two short periods in the 1940s and 1970s as mentioned above. There has been no constitution that mandated more than a fixed number of ministers be elected MPs.²⁾

The small number of elected MPs among cabinet ministers derives partly from actual power relations. For national leaders who have assumed office by military coup, the key to acquiring and maintaining power has been the armed forces and civilian bureaucracy, not parliament. Such leaders have made efforts to create institutions to downplay election results. Indonesia under the Suharto regime and Myanmar under the 2008 constitution offer good examples. Institutional relations between the cabinet and parliament have also been significant. Especially important has been whether parliament was unicameral or bicameral and the ratio of elected to appointed members of parliament. Since a majority of appointed MPs were military officers and government officials, they could be regarded as supporters of the administration that appointed them. It was vital for non-elected national leaders to minimize the power of elected MPs. These leaders tried to increase the ratio of appointed members in parliament (see Table 1). The most convenient way was to appoint all MPs. In fact, there were no elected MPs from 1932 to 1933, 1958 to 1969, 1971 to 1975, 1976 to 1979, 1991 to 1992, or 2006 to 2007. These fully appointed parliaments did not at all legitimize the administration even if they had the authority to deliberate and reject bills. An alternative scheme was a unicameral system consisting of an equal number of appointed and elected MPs. This option

2) The 1946 constitution of Japan stipulates that the prime minister should be an elected MP and more than half of the cabinet ministers should be elected MPs. The intent of the stipulation is to guarantee responsible government.

Table 1. Historical Transformation of Parliament, 1932-2012

	Ratio of elected MPs	Total number	Lower House	Senate (Upper House)		
			elected	unicameral appointed	bicameral appointed	elected
28 Jun 1932—9 Dec 1933	0.0%	70	0	70		
15 Nov 1933—9 Dec 1937	50.0%	156	78	78		
5 Aug 1946—8 Nov 1947 ¹⁾	69.0%	258	178			80
29 Jan 1948—29 Nov 1951 ²⁾	49.7%	199	99		100	
26 Feb 1952—25 Feb 1957	50.0%	246	123	123		
26 Feb 1957—16 Sep 1957	56.5%	283	160	123		
15 Dec 1957—20 Oct 1958 ³⁾	60.6%	307	186	121		
3 Feb 1959—20 Jun 1968	0.0%	240	0	240		
10 Feb 1969—17 Nov 1971 ⁴⁾	57.2%	383	219		164	
16 Dec 1972—14 Oct 1973	0.0%	0	0	299		
23 Dec 1973—25 Jan 1975 ⁵⁾	0.0%	299	0			299
26 Jan 1975—12 Jan 1976	72.9%	369	269		100	
4 Apr 1976—16 Oct 1976	73.6%	379	279		100	
20 Nov 1976—20 Oct 1977	0.0%	340	0		340	
22 Apr 1979—19 Mar 1983	57.2%	526	301		225	
15 Mar 1991—21 Mar 1992	0.0%	292	0	292		
22 Mar 1992—29 June 1992	57.1%	630	360		270	
6 Jan 2001—19 Sep 2006	71.4%	700	500			200
12 Oct 2006—	0.0%	242	0	242		
23 Dec 2007—10 May 2011	76.2%	630	480		74	76
11 Jul 2011—	76.9%	650	500		74	76

Notes: 1) Elections for 82 seats were held in August 1946. Senators were elected by MPs on May 24, 1946.

2) Senators were appointed on Nov 18, 1947. Elections for 21 MP seats were held on 5 June 1949.

3) The number of MPs was decreased 26 on Jan 1, 1958. 26 MPs were elected on Jan 31, 1958. The number of appointed MPs was decreased 26 on Feb 8, 1958.

4) 164 senators were appointed on Jul 4, 1968. Additional 44 senators were appointed on Feb 25, 1969.

5) The national assembly of 2,347 members selected MPs.

6) Screened rows designate for bicameral system.

Source: Made by author

enabled smooth passage of government bills and the pretense of democracy. Parliament from 1932 to 1946 and from 1951 to 1957 fit this pattern. In this scheme, the administration obtained a majority in parliament only if it could add to its base of support of all non-elected MPs the support of one elected MP from the chamber. There was also a bicameral system consisting of elected MPs and appointed senators from 1946 to 1951, 1969 to 1971, 1975 to 1976, 1979 to 1991, and 1992 to 2001. In this system, the prime minister needed to seek support among elected MPs to obtain approval of government-sponsored bills. To this end, the prime minister included some elected MPs in the cabinet. Cabinet portfolios were used as rewards for elected MPs who supported the

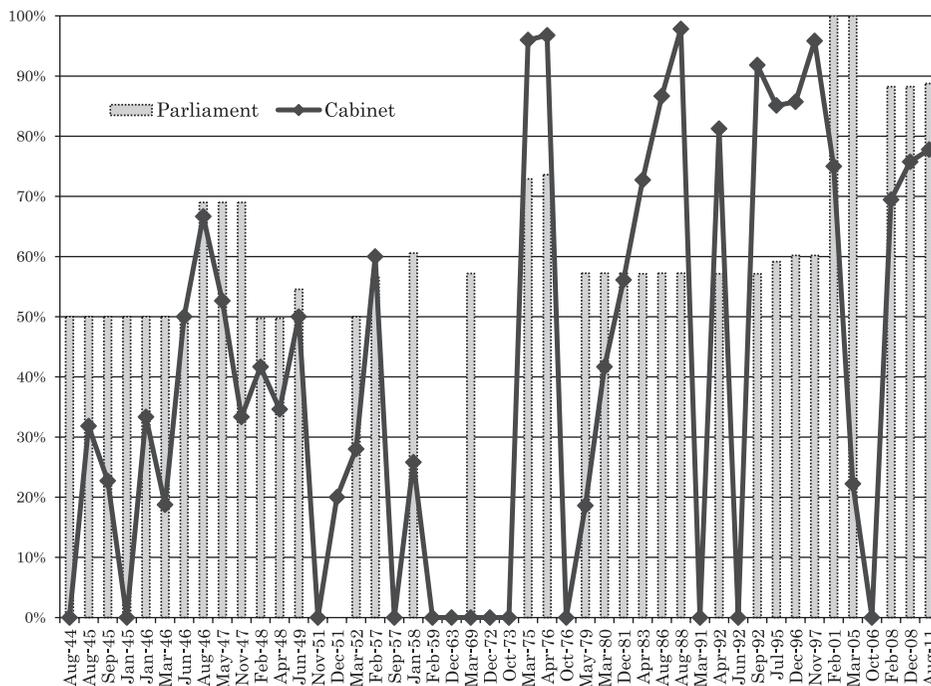


Fig. 1. Ratio of Elected MPs in Parliament and Cabinet

Source: Made by author

administration³⁾ (see Fig. 1). If the prime minister could maintain the support of a majority of elected MPs, he could retain power even if he was not an elected MP or a leader of the dominant party. Prime Minister Prem in the 1980s, is a typical example.

The situation changed completely when the prime minister had to be an elected MP, as stipulated in the 1992 constitution. The 1992 amendment followed the violent suppression of protesters following the 1991 military coup [Murray 1996]. Likewise, a coup in 2006 produced the 2007 constitution, which again called for an elected MP as prime minister. That the prime minister should be an elected MP seems to have become an established principle in Thailand.

2. When Elections Began to Count

2.1 Electoral Reform

The 1992 constitutional amendment marked a turning point in the Thai electoral system. The 1991

3) Parliament under the 1969 constitution was an exception because the constitution prohibited MPs from obtaining cabinet portfolios.

constitution had inherited the electoral system of the 1978 constitution with little change. Drafters in 1991 had paid more attention to the power and number of appointed senators relative to elected MPs than to the electoral system. But the 1992 amendment required the prime minister to be an elected MP. Leaders of winning parties in general elections became front-runners for the premiership, and for the first time in Thai history, the electoral system became the focus of constitutional debates.

Under the 1991 constitution, there were 360 elected and 270 appointed MPs. Elections were conducted under a multiple-seat constituency system, with three MPs to each electoral district. Citizens in each district could cast three votes for three seats. Almost all electorates chose candidates rather than parties. Electorates could vote either for candidates of the same party or from different parties. If, as was often the case, a favorite politician changed party affiliation, the electorate voted for the same candidate irrespective of party affiliation. Thai voters hardly cared about party affiliation.

Almost all political parties in Thailand after the 1980s were conservative. For politicians running for election, party affiliation made little difference. Party policies and ideologies were similar and undistinguished. And party membership was small. Most party branches were private offices of politicians and changed party signs according to the party affiliation of the owners. Political parties, therefore, had a limited capacity to attract votes. Running as an independent did not at all jeopardize a politician's potential for election success. Even after the 1974 constitution prohibited independent MPs, party affiliation had little affect on election results. Since MPs did not owe their success to political parties, it was difficult for parties to control MPs, and political instability was the result.

After the 1970s, no political parties attained a majority in parliament. Medium and small political parties proliferated due to the multiple-seat electoral system. It was quite rare for a political party to win one-third of all seats. Coalition government was the rule. It was difficult for a prime minister to display strong leadership. First, it was difficult to form and maintain a coalition without repeated concessions to coalition partners. Although a prime minister could decide which cabinet posts to allocate to coalition partners, he could not interfere with the specific choice of personnel or exert effective control over cabinet ministers. Second, MPs were not subject to a party line because they did not owe their electoral success to any party and could shift parties with ease. MPs dissatisfied with the selection of ministers tended to urge an early shuffling of the cabinet. Third, in forming a coalition, the number of government MPs was critical. The larger the number of government MPs, the smaller the number of cabinet posts allocated to coalition partner. So the number of government

MPs was kept as small as possible, slightly exceeding the majority. As a result, coalition governments constantly risked collapse by a small rebellion, and no administration completed a four-year term. Fourth, every leading coalition party lost elections mainly because of deteriorating cohesion within the party and financial problems. Every election produced a change of government. Although elections seemed to legitimize democracy, politics remained unstable and leadership weak [Siripan 2006].

The electoral system adopted by the 1997 constitution aimed to remedy these deficiencies. The House of Representatives changed from a multiple-seat constituency system to a combination of 400 seats from single-seat electoral constituencies and 100 seats from a party-list proportional representative system. To prevent incumbent MPs from changing party affiliation just before elections, MPs were asked to resign from parliament before changing parties. The drafters essentially prohibited constituency MPs from holding cabinet positions because they hoped for cabinets consisting mainly of party-list MPs and anticipated stable government without rebellious MPs [Tamada 2008].

2.2 Effects of the New Electoral System

This electoral reform had profound effects on elections and politics. The electorate began placing more emphasis on party banners than on individual candidates. A candidate's party affiliation now became more significant than his or her individual identity.

The most visible change was the emergence of a dominant party commanding a parliamentary majority. Figure 2 shows how many seats the top four political parties have garnered in general elections since 1957 (see Fig. 2). The top party acquired a majority for the first time in February 1957. Although it exceeded 40% in 1976 and 30% in 1969 and 1996, the majority party typically has not reached 30%. The TRT did, however, nearly attain a majority in the first general election under the 1997 constitution. And in 2005 the TRT won 75% of the seats, exceeding a majority by a wide margin. If we examine the share of the top four parties, it exceeded 90% for the first time in 2001 and reached 100% in 2005. Electoral reform in 1997 clearly spurred dramatic change.

Two tactics were critical for the TRT's victory. First, it bought as many incumbent MPs as possible. Such was conventional practice in Thailand, followed by almost all political parties. However, the TRT surpassed others in financial power since its leader Thaksin was one of the wealthiest businessmen in Thailand. Thus, the TRT had the largest number of incumbent MPs before the 2001 election, despite having only been founded in 1998 and having never experienced a national election. The TRT used the same tactic in 2005 and secured approximately 350 incumbent MPs before the election, although it had only garnered 248 seats in 2001. The second tactic was new to Thai politics: attractive campaign pledges. These were dual-track: 1) a generous poverty relief measure

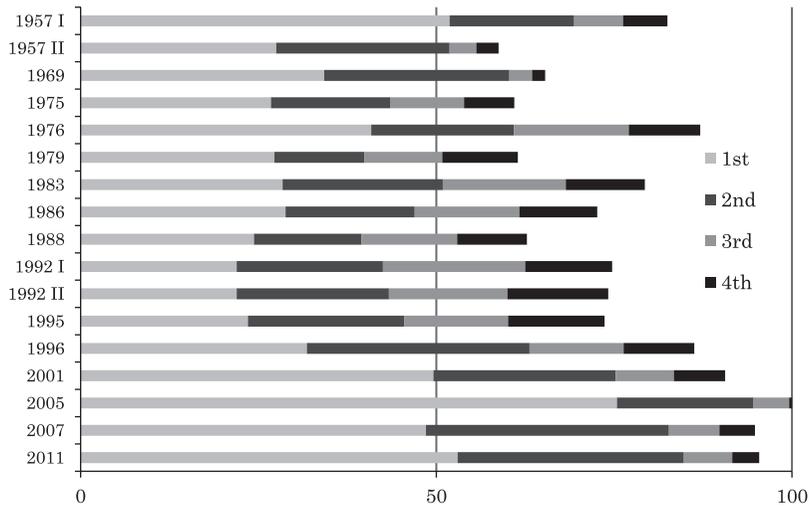


Fig. 2. How Much Top Four Parties Got

Source: Made by author

for the poor, and 2) a promise of recovery from the 1997 economic crisis and vibrant growth for the rich. Although few people believed in the feasibility of the pledges, they were excited about them. They enthusiastically voted again for the TRT four years later because the party had kept its promises far better than anticipated. The TRT was quite savvy about recognizing the growing importance of campaign promises under the new system of single-seat constituencies and a party-list proportional system and devised an alluring campaign manifesto before any other parties. As the saying goes, “The early bird gets the worm.”

Before turning to the impact of election campaigns, let us briefly examine how the TRT was able to fulfill its campaign pledges. The party had to overcome two obstacles. First, coordination with coalition partners became a distraction and good excuse for inaction. Even with a clear campaign pledge, parties could not fulfill their promises without accommodating opposing partners. Second, weak coalition governments could not force the bureaucracy to implement policies unfavorable to it. Having secured an overwhelming number of seats, however, Thaksin hardly needed to coordinate with coalition partners and could exert strong leadership [Kriangchai 2012]. No longer were campaign pledges just empty rhetoric. Failure to follow through on pledges raised charges of laziness and lack of sincerity.

Election tactics and unprecedented electoral victories of the TRT have had a profound impact upon the electorate. Elections have become an increasingly indispensable tool for Thai citizens to choose the prime minister and government policies. This is clear if we compare the results of by-

elections with those of general elections. Although the TRT surpassed other parties in general elections in 2001 and 2005, it did not fare well in by-elections. There were 28 by-elections between April 28, 2001 and March 20, 2004 and the results were poor for the TRT: thirteen wins, thirteen losses, and two abstentions [Tamada 2005: 98-99]. These by-elections did not employ a party-list system and had little impact on the choice of premier or government policies. They took place under the conventional practice of choosing candidates rather than parties. This is powerful evidence that the new single-seat constituency and proportional representation system changed the character and meaning of national elections for Thai citizens.

3. Reaction and Counteraction

3.1 Reaction 1: What Was Done

Extra-parliamentary forces worried about an elected prime minister with democratic legitimacy who was not completely responsive to their demands. While they hoped to topple the PM, they could not defeat him in elections. The military, therefore, staged a coup in 2006 with the support of extra-parliamentary forces.

The aim of the coup was to oust Thaksin and prevent a second Thaksin from coming to power. To prevent Thaksin's supporters from winning elections again, the court dissolved the TRT and placed a five-year ban on its 111 board members. The coup government froze Thaksin's assets and drafted a new constitution. The 2007 constitution changed the electoral system to prevent the reappearance of a large-scale political party. A multiple-seat constituency system was reintroduced to ensure unstable coalition government. Although it retained the party-list proportional representative system, the nation-wide constituency was arbitrarily divided into eight regional blocks to prevent a strong nation-wide legitimization of power similar to a presidential system [Tamada 2009: 103-106]. To weaken the prime minister's leadership, moreover, a term limit of eight years was introduced and the number of MPs necessary for a no-confidence motion was halved. Constituency MPs regained the right to join the cabinet. Finally, a new party law in 2007 threatened party dissolution in the event of electoral irregularities.

Despite these reforms and a freezing of Thaksin's assets, Thaksin's party (the People Power Party, PPP hereafter) won 233 out of 480 seats in the general election of December 23, 2007. Many citizens continued to cast their votes for parties, rather than for individual candidates. Recent decentralization might encourage this preference for party banners. Every chief of local governments (provincial administrative organizations, municipalities, and tambon administrative organizations) is elected by the population and is directly accountable to it. An executive chief can fulfill his/her

campaign promises because, unlike on the national level, local officials offer little resistance and the local assembly has little power vis-à-vis the chief. Decentralization must have had some affect on popular expectations about national government.

When the PPP coalition government in 2008 attempted as promised during the election to amend the constitution, PAD renewed its attempt to halt the change and overthrow the administration. PAD occupied the Prime Minister's Office in August, two international airports in November and demanded the prime minister's resignation. But a resignation would only bring another PM elected from the ruling PPP. Toppling the ruling party was, in other words, difficult without a PPP defeat in general elections. But the PPP was unlikely to be defeated in an election. The only sure way to topple the PPP administration was a coup. PAD's activities in 2008 were, in fact, tantamount to calling for another coup. Well aware of this, Thailand's top brass repeatedly declared that, "The military will not stage a coup." When the Constitution Court dissolved the PPP on December 2, 2008, army leaders pressured MPs to change sides and established a new government led by the Democrat Party. It was reported that PPP MPs were told, "Do you know whom you fight against?," "You cannot defeat the monarchy" [*Krungthep Thurakit*, December 13, 2008; *Maticchon*, December 13, 2008; *Thai Post*, December 13, 2008].

3.2 *Reaction 2: What Was Asserted*

PAD was a mass political movement that rejected a significant political role for the masses [Sirot 2011: 152]. To resist democratization, PAD attempted to discredit electoral legitimacy. "It claimed that voters could not be trusted because most rural people were uneducated and corrupt" [Chang Noi 2008a]. It characterized the electoral victory of the TRT and PPP as a consequence of electoral irregularities and vote buying, and proposed a new form of parliament, with 70% appointed and 30% elected MPs [*Manager Online*, July 4, 2008].

As Chang Noi appropriately argues, anti-democratic forces repeatedly criticized vote-buying because of their concern about democratization. "[T]he problem is not that upcountry voters don't know how to use their votes, and that the result is distorted by patronage and vote-buying. The problem is that they have learned to use the vote too well. In four national polls, they have chosen very consistently and rationally. And, of course, that may be the real problem. Back when many upcountry electors sold their votes, and when their weight in national politics was, therefore, zero, nobody worried about vote-buying. But now that electors have smartened up, they have to be stopped. The bleating about vote-buying and patronage politics is simply an attempt to undermine electoral democracy because it seems to be working" [Chang Noi 2008b].

In addition, anti-democratic forces continue to stress the corrupting influence of elections. They

insist that, because MPs spend so much money on elections, they have to resort to graft to cover costs. Corruption, however, has not been confined to elected MPs. Military leaders who ruled the country for decades also have a long history of corruption. Political corruption can be found among both appointed and elected leaders and has nothing to do with elections. As a young researcher notes, the scope of behaviors defined by the law as “corruption” has grown substantially since the 1990s. This legal device has the effect of unseating politicians and discrediting elected MPs [Toyama 2012].

To deny the legitimacy of elections, however, requires another form of legitimacy. Anti-democratic forces like the PAD have, therefore, resorted to royalism. Although it is an effective tactic, the politicization of the monarchy has invited criticism. “It matters little that mainstream media in Thailand cannot or are not willing to discuss the perceived role of the palace in politics due to the lese majesty law. Many red shirts have done that quite blatantly on the radio, online, in the streets, and in their homes” since the 2006 coup [Pravit 2009]. Understandably, those who have continued to vote for Thaksin’s party—the TRT in 2001, 2005 and 2006, the PPP in 2007 and the Phua Thai Party (PTP) in 2011—have been angry. The PAD forced the TRT administration to dissolve parliament in 2006, only a year after the election. The Constitution Court nullified the April 2006 election the following month. A coup d’état forced a one-year postponement of a rerun election originally slated for late 2006. The Constitution Court and top military brass ousted the PPP administration in only ten months. They disregarded the popular will as expressed in the three consecutive elections of 2005, 2006, and 2007. The PAD, which has consistently stood at the vanguard of the anti-Thaksin movement, has depended upon royalism, boasting its deep allegiance to the monarchy, demanding similar loyalty from the people, and condemning its enemies for a lack of allegiance. Many have legitimately wondered why royalists have not reproached, or at least reprimanded, the PAD for its politicization of the monarchy.

3.3 Counteraction

Thaksin’s supporters and intellectuals concerned about de-democratization formed the UDD in 2007 to battle coup proponents [Chaturon 2009]. The UDD successfully joined forces with an electorate angry about the rejection of election results. It mobilized a large number of citizens from all over the country to rally in Bangkok in 2009 and 2010 for general elections. Although they were violently suppressed, they did not lose their will to fight [Nostitz 2009, 2011].

Due to democratization and decentralization since the 1990s, Thai citizens have come to demand that political leaders, both national and local, be elected by the people, not appointed. Since elected leaders have been more responsive to the electorate than appointed leaders, citizens

have learned that elections have an impact upon daily life. They have tasted electoral politics and appreciated its value. More importantly, universal voting rights grant rural and lower income urban residents a power to vote equal to citizens in the middle and upper classes, irrespective of disparities in wealth, education, occupation, or housing. The right is a rare remedy for inequality. Postponing elections or defying election results only stirs up anger among those who have few political weapons other than votes. These people cannot at all countenance a disregard for election results [Nithi 2011]. The people have begun to rapidly transform “from subjects to citizens” [see Aphichat 2011].

For democracy to become the only game in town [Linz and Stepan 1996: 5], it is important for a majority of people to consider elections indispensable. In this sense, Thai politics is steadily becoming democratic. Ironically, Thaksin has contributed to this democratization. He has been both a beneficiary of and contributor to democracy. He came to power because of democratization in the 1990s, and contributed to the process in two ways. First, as the first Thai national leader to make and fulfill a variety of attractive campaign pledges, he convinced a majority of the electorate of the primacy of electoral over non-electoral politics. Thaksin awoke the masses unwittingly and profoundly [Thitinan 2011]. Second, after Thaksin’s downfall in 2006, democratic legitimacy became one of the few effective weapons against his foes. Anti-Thaksin and anti-democratic forces made Thaksin a martyr for democracy, something that would not have happened under normal conditions.

The people were frustrated, moreover, with the double standard of the military, which hesitated to halt the PAD’s occupation of government buildings and airports in 2008 but suppressed the UDD harshly in 2009 and 2010. The military and the PAD were trapped in a vicious circle. The more they proclaimed loyalty to the monarchy, the more gossip and innuendo engulfed the throne.

Conclusion

The ruling Democrats were expected to postpone a general election in 2011 because of the slim chance for victory. The party, after all, had rejected UDD demands for early elections in 2009 and 2010. However, the Democrats did decide upon elections in 2011 and began preparations. They promoted various redistributive policies more generously than the TRT government. Although they had earlier vehemently objected to constitutional change, they embarked upon an amendment of the 2007 constitution in January 2011. Electoral reform was a major focus. Constituency MPs were reduced from 400 to 375 seats and multi-seat districts became single-seat constituencies. The party-list proportional representative system transformed from eight regional blocks to a nation-wide constituency and from 80 to 125 seats. This new system resembled the system outlined in the 1997

constitution (see Table 2).

The key to understanding this reform lies in the party-list proportional representative system. The Democrats were understandably more confident in a party list than in a constituency system. First, although the party was defeated by the PPP 233 to 164 in the 2007 general elections, it was neck-and-neck with the PPP in the party list—33 seats to the PPP’s 34 (Table 3). Second, a candidate for the premiership is critical for the party-list proportional representative system. The PTP did not have a candidate for the premiership when the constitution was amended in early 2011. The secretary-general of the Democrats said on May 16, 2011 that, “The Democratic Party expected to emerge with 65-66 MPs from the party list system” [*Bangkok Post*, May 16, 2011]. A political scientist appointed by the Democrats who had chaired the drafting committee and continued to chair the amendment committee said on April 11, 2011 that “Under the committee’s proposal, the prime minister would be directly elected in the party list system. The party that emerges with the most MPs in the party list system would have the right to form a government, and its leader would be prime minister.” [*Bangkok Post*, April 11, 2011]. This attested to the Democrats’ confidence in and preference for a party-list proportional representative system.

But the election did not turn out as planned. Thaksin’s PTP formally put up Thaksin’s sister Yinglak as a candidate for the premiership in May 2011 and won the general election of July 2011 by a wide margin, in both the party list and constituency system. Yinglak assumed the premiership, but

Table 2. Changes of Electoral System

	1991	1997	2007	2011
Multi-Seat	360		400	
Single Seat		400		375
Party List	0	100	80	125
Total	360	500	480	500

Source: Made by author, based on various constitutions of Thailand.

Table 3. Comparison between the Democrat Party and Thaksin’s Parties in the Party List System

		PPP / PTP	The Democrats
2007	votes	12,331,381	12,138,960
	ratio	41.10%	40.40%
	seats	34	33
2011	votes	15,744,190	11,433,762
	ratio	52.40%	38.10%
	seats	61	44

Source: Made by author, based on election results announced by the Election Commission of Thailand.

her supporters remained anxious about another possible military coup or court verdict. The future of Thai democracy depends, in part, on how her administration ends. The crisis continues.

The ongoing crisis reminds us that there has been a struggle for power between advocates and critics of popular sovereignty in Thailand since the 1932 Revolution. The politicization of the monarchy by self-proclaimed royalists in recent years has pushed Thai politics to the brink of collapse. The present political system was identified in the constitutions after 1978 as a “democracy with the king as head of state,” and called “Thai-Style Democracy” [Hewison and Kengkij 2010]. A royalist politician-cum-intellectual Khukrit Pramot characterized it as an “equal co-ownership of sovereign power by the king and the people (*ratcha pracha samasai*)” [Saichon 2007: 181-182]. A form of diarchy has been the political reality since the 1970s. But the current political crisis has led the people to ask, “Who is the owner of sovereign power, the king or the people?” and “Are we subjects or citizens?” The people realize that they cannot dispense with electoral democracy not just because they understand the power of the ballot box but because their suffrage has been downplayed.

In sum, electoral reform in tandem with an unanticipated wave of democratization accelerated the pace of democratization in Thailand. Tactfully riding the wave, Thaksin provoked a reaction and was beaten down. Most of the electorate felt the collateral damage of de-democratization and resisted. The best way to slow democratization is not to deny democracy but to raise the level of disenchantment. The thirst for democracy will only disappear when people come to think it is worthless.

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